

**Human Rights and
Equal Opportunity Commission**

Sex Discrimination Commissioner

7 September, 2000

Dr Brendan Nelson
House Education Committee Chair
House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Employment,
Education and Workplace Relations
Parliament of Australia
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Dr Nelson,

Re: Submission to the Inquiry into Boys' Education.

I welcome this Inquiry as a means of addressing in a thoughtful, measured way, the important question of equal opportunity in education and whether proactive strategies for boys are required.

I lodge this submission on behalf of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in my capacity as federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner and Acting Disability Discrimination Commissioner. On a more personal note, I would like to draw your attention to my extensive experience in anti-discrimination policies and programs in education and that I am a former teacher and mother of an upper primary school-aged male child.

Your recent comments as House Education Committee Chair echo the views of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission on programs for school aged children:

Programs for boys do not have to be, and should not be, at the expense of girls. In fact, boys' programs should ultimately benefit women, girls and society generally, as they should be developed in such a way that they contribute to creating a value system that tolerates less harassment, less violence and much less intimidation by men.

Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, Inquiry into the Education of Boys, *Media Release*, 19 June 2000.

It is important, however, to clarify some of the perceptions around gender and education and to respond to the more virulent misconceptions surrounding boys' education.

- Some commentators blame gender equality policies and moves to ensure equal and fair access for a perceived demise in boys' education standards. These claims remain unsubstantiated. Gender equality policies support equal opportunities for girls *and* boys. Example one: girls and boys have been

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granted the right to study subjects previously denied or discouraged on the basis of gender, such as multi-strands science or home economics. Example two: girls and boys are encouraged through vocational guidance and subject choice in senior school to look at non-traditional areas of work and study. In practical terms, principles of gender equality have benefited boys by broadening their opportunities.

- One view that seems to have gained media currency, despite research to the contrary, is that boys have “fallen behind” girls at school, that they have been disadvantaged and now need to catch up. Research conducted at the University of Sydney demonstrates that girls have consistently out-performed boys scholastically for over one hundred years, since 1884 in fact, when records of school results were first maintained (Georgia Kamperos, “Academic Achievements of Girls & Boys”, *In Alliance*, 2000). There has been no sudden change in the performance of girls and boys. More importantly, to promote thinking about boys and girls as isolated groups in competition with each other, with one ahead and the other falling behind, is naïve and simplistic. In addition, it negates diversity within each group, whilst simultaneously fostering gender stereotypes which are harmful to boys, often presenting an inaccurate and negative picture of boys who individually out-perform girls.
- To blame exposure to female role models for fluctuations in boys’ school performance is in itself a sad gender stereotype. Clearly our community has a long way to go if it believes boys will only see learning as important if the message is passed on by men. Teachers are professional educators, and to say, as many have recently, that messages are less important or significant when they are passed on by a professional educator who is a woman is outrageous. This is a major cultural problem where one gender is considered of greater worth than the other that we are identifying; efforts to deal with it, rather than schemes to foster it, should be our priority.

Positive professional female role models can only be good for both boys and girls as they help break down stereotypes. When boys are encouraged to respect and admire qualities associated with all people it affects their performance in a positive way. A macho culture that encourages boys to reject feminine pursuits, focus on non-scholastic forms of expression and to conform to narrow versions of masculinity discourages successful study. This is a problem with our culture, not women teachers. For example, the recent Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs commissioned report *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females in School and their Initial Destinations after Leaving School* found that boys’ school performance was adversely affected by their choice of traditional subjects, even when they did not do well in those areas.

- Gender differences in education do not correlate with social and economic disadvantage. Female employees in Australia, despite years of scholastic success, are subject to lower pay, fewer benefits and higher incidence of discrimination and harassment than male employees. Male and female employees include school-aged children, who enter the workforce as casual and part-time workers, trainees and interns. Employees’ previous school

performance is not mirrored to date in workplace realities, which still portray significant disadvantage for women compared to men.

- The other factor so many people overlook is that if boys and girls are to be compared as adolescents then we are comparing young people with different maturity levels. On average boys will be a few years less mature than girls. This factor cannot be overlooked if there is to be a sensible thorough discussion on this issue. Time may be well spent looking at scholastic levels matching maturity more closely rather than age. Indeed, a number of private schools now insist that boys start primary school later in an attempt to deal with the biological realities. Other schools are attempting segregation on the basis of gender at certain ages and in certain subjects.

In summary, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission:

- opposes a shifting of resources to gender-specific programs designed only for boys. New programs should consider the needs and problems of girls as well as boys and deal with cultural limitations imposed on learning;
- disagrees with the view that the status and performance of girls at school is a matter for complacency, and that boys as a group are deserving of specialised attention;
- opposes the emergence of the crude way of thinking about gender relations as a competition or race that only one gender-based “team” can be winning;
- suggests that the Committee consider strategies that assist boys *and* girls, as well as recognising the diversity within groups;
- exhorts the Committee to look at the position of males and females in society generally, and not artificially limit their consideration to the few years at school in which girls enjoy comparable opportunities to boys; and
- requests that the Committee acknowledge the fact that girls, on leaving school, are faced with employment and other forms of discrimination and that the school years are crucial for girls when it comes to developing capacities to deal with the far higher levels of discrimination and harassment that Australian women continue to face.

Yours faithfully

Susan Halliday
Sex Discrimination Commissioner
Acting Disability Discrimination Commissioner
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission